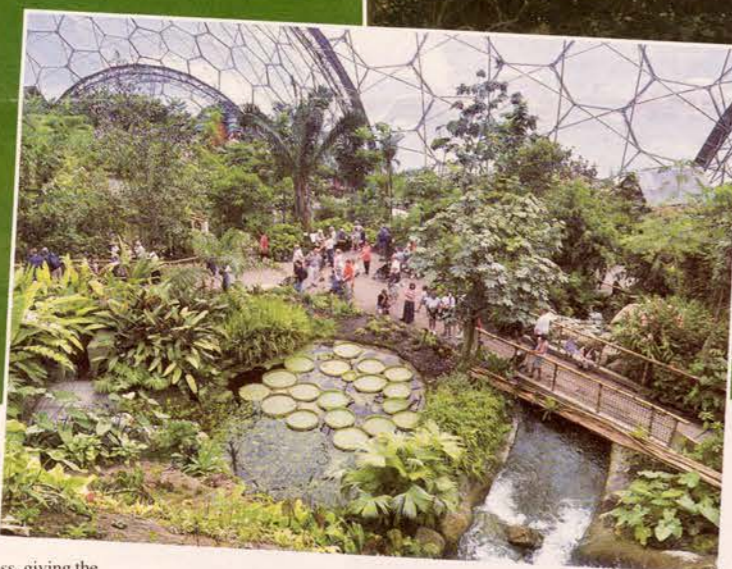


There's no place like the domes



What links Barry Manilow and a clay pit in Cornwall? Answer:

TIM SMIT, the former record producer who's transformed a desolate part of Cornwall into a tourist phenomenon. One year – and more than a million visitors – since its opening, the Eden Project proves domes can be a success. **JULIAN CHAMPKIN** meets the man who made it happen



Out of this world: The Eden Project in Cornwall used space-age technology to build the spectacular domes. Left: The Humid Tropics Biome has proved a massive hit with visitors. Above left: Driving force Tim Smit

The Eden Project has captured the nation's imagination. It has already had more than a million visitors, drawn as much to the project's extraordinary domes as to its spectacular array of 4,000 species of plants. From

the moment it opened, it achieved unalloyed success, giving the local Cornish economy a much-needed boost. Meanwhile, just ten miles away, The Lost Gardens of Heligan, the once-famous Victorian gardens now restored to their former glory, have also attracted praise — and visitors in their thousands.

There is just one man behind these two wonders: Tim Smit. More impressive still, creating Heligan and Eden is his second career — he made his first fortune as a record producer, thanks largely to Barry Manilow records. So how did this riot of planting come about? 'I wanted a greenhouse at the Heligan garden. There wasn't enough room, so I looked for somewhere else to build it.' That's his cover story. But most of us wanting a greenhouse don't end up with something that costs £86 million.

'Well, all right, even if there had been room for a new greenhouse at Heligan, the Eden Project still would have got built,' he concedes. Tim Smit is tall, balding and short of sleep, although his worries are starting to ease now that visitor numbers are proving his scheme an undoubted success. He prefers to portray himself as a simple man at sea in a maze of experts handling the finance, construction and plants, but it is only a pretence. Somehow this simple man transformed a disused clay pit in a

depressed area of Cornwall into the biggest new tourist attraction in the land.

'I made it happen by telling lies,' he says. 'I had assembled a team of architects, engineers, builders, plantmen. They had all worked for months on spec without pay towards this wonderful idea. We needed funding for it, and the Millennium Commission had millions to give away to good projects.' So he put up a proposal, happily asking them for £50 million; and went up to London; and the Millennium Commission turned him down flat. 'I drove straight home to Cornwall, and told the team that it was all okay, they had given us the money,' he says.

Why? 'What else was there to do? The team would have been devastated if they had known. The thing would never have got built. What would you have done? Told the truth? That would be the cynical, defeatist, English way.'

Tim Smit is only half English; the other half is Dutch. 'I sometimes think that you have to be an outsider to get anything done here. Englishmen of our generation' — he is 47 — 'have spent their lives becoming accustomed to things not working, to cynicism, to decline. But inspire them, and things can work.

Call it a great big bluff,' he says. 'I knew we would get the money in the end, I just knew it.'

Inevitably, he was right — eventually the Millennium Commission stumped up £43 million. But what if they hadn't? 'I would have lost a lot on my own account. I had already bought the nursery where we were raising the tropical plants with my own money, and all that would have gone. I don't think I would quite have lost my home, but it would have been close.'

Which perhaps accounts for his wife Candy's attitude to his projects. 'She is usually three-quarters of a project behind. She didn't take any interest in Heligan until it was almost finished; and then there were a few sarcastic remarks about it, and then she became passionate about it. It is the same with this one. She has stayed aloof from it until quite recently. She says it is a safety policy for the family [they have three children]. She knows I would have been utterly devastated if Heligan or this had gone belly up, and she didn't want both of us in that state.'

The Eden Project is Kew Gardens Lite. Both have huge and wonderful greenhouses and vistas. But unlike Kew, Eden does not really grow terribly rare plants: 'It is just the opposite: we show people the plants that are grown all over the world to feed us and clothe us and that we utterly depend on.' Bananas sprout in the man-made soil. 'In our first season we harvested one banana. Someone costed out its share of

greenhouse space and gardening time, and worked out that that single banana had cost £750,000 — the most expensive banana in history.'

There are California poppy fields, that native Americans have done fertility dances over, Amazonian waterfalls, and a huge Victoria water lily. Its flowers open only at night: the first night the flower is white, with a scent to attract beetles. Then it closes up on them, trapping them inside it. The next night it opens again, not white but red this time, and scentless; the beetles are released, but they don't like red scentless flowers; so they wander away to find another white one, carrying the pollen with them.

Crafty lilies are just some of the fascinating plants at the Eden Project, although the man who takes you round and explains about them all isn't Tim Smit. There is a reason for that. 'I don't know much about plants,' says Smit. 'But I know a lot of people who do. I get the experts who work here, they explain it to me in idiot-language, and that gives me something to take away, even if I don't understand it all.'

This somehow overlooks the fact that both Heligan and Eden were driven by one man. Not that Smit's success always looked so assured. He got himself expelled, twice, from the same school, which must be some kind of record in itself. After that, a career in rock music seemed almost inevitable. 'In the music business, you can succeed by being

average. I went to the parties and networked, but in musical terms I was really pretty mediocre.

'I remember going down the Champs-Élysées in a stretch limo drinking champagne on the day that one of my records was at Number One and feeling, "I have got there, I have done it, I am in the top one per cent of money and career and the rest of it, and is this it? Is this as good as it gets?" It was misery, sheer misery. And I have never felt so unhappy in all my life.'

That conversion on the Champs-Élysées prompted the idea to retire to Cornwall and set up a recording studio, where he stumbled, literally, upon Heligan: 'A neighbour said: "Come and see what I have just inherited." And we pushed through undergrowth, and suddenly there was this wreck of a forsaken garden.' It wasn't The Lost Gardens of Heligan then; it was just a derelict garden. The romantic name was coined by Smit during his extraordinary transformation of the site.

'I'm a believer in those inspirational moments, when you follow your instinct and suddenly things change. I've had two: crashing through brambles to see Heligan was one, the other was when I first saw this place. We had looked at every disused china clay heap in the county. We already had what we thought was a site that would do but then a friend from the china clay company rang me about a new one that might be available. I only went along out of politeness; and suddenly we were standing at the edge of this huge hole in the ground; and I thought, "Yes, this is it, this is where it is going to happen."

The rest was a struggle with various men in grey suits — the

essential ones among them he won over — to finance his business plan. But what about the costs rising to £86 million? 'That never worried me, not at all. I can't say why it didn't, it just didn't,' he says. In any case, he had other problems to worry about. 'We had to get the thing built on time, or the plants we were bringing on would have grown out of the top of the three-storey nursery greenhouse where we were rearing them. If we'd lost the momentum for a moment, we would have lost a whole year because of the way tropical plants grow.'

The project has used the latest materials to create its space-ship design. A clay pit is sterile, so they made 90,000 tons of artificial soil from clay finings, compost, household waste and manure. There are now two domed areas — or Biomes — covering the humid tropics and the warm temperate areas, and within these are the vast greenhouses. Glass would have been too heavy so the frames are triple-glazed with thin plastic that is halfway between clingfilm and toffee wrapping.

And Tim hasn't stopped there. He still has one more dome area to build on the site. Then he hopes for a hotel-cum-conference centre-cum-'college' which experts will visit each year to impart their knowledge and eco-wisdom. 'Cornwall will not know what's hit it.' But could it just be one big ecological theme park? Tim is adamant about this. 'Eden is not about plants at all. It is about people. This mustn't be a theme park. All that effort just for a theme park? That would be depressing.' *Eden, by Tim Smit is published by Bantam Press on Thursday, priced £25.*